



ASK GEORGE

George Hobica

Frequent fliers can phone it in

Pick up miles with new cell service

Q: I read somewhere that I can get frequent-flier miles if I sign up for mobile phone service. Do you know which airline or mobile phone company offers the best deal?

A: If you're looking to sign up for a new wireless service or to add an additional line of service, you can earn some miles with Delta Air Lines' SkyMiles, Northwest WorldPerks, United Airlines' Mileage Plus or US Airways' Dividend Miles programs. Members can earn 5,000 miles (3,500 on US Airways) when activating new phones and rate plans with any of the major carriers (Verizon, AT&T/Cingular, T-Mobile, or Sprint/Nextel. United has the additional choice of Alltel and US Cellular). SkyMiles members can also earn 10 miles for every dollar spent on accessories, while Dividend Miles members can earn 5 miles for every dollar spent. And right now, SkyMiles members can get a Samsung BlackJack for \$49.99 (no mail-in rebates required) with a new activation on Cingular, versus the online price at Cingular of \$249.99 plus a \$100 mail-in rebate. The BlackJack is a terrific phone with excellent reception (I have one). I only wish I had known

about this deal before I bought mine!

The same program is also available for AirTran Airways A+ Rewards members, where members will receive three reward credits for a new activation. Just as a reference, AirTran reward members require eight points for a one-way coach ticket and four points for a business class upgrade.

For more information or to sign up, visit www.skymileswireless.com for Delta, www.worldperkswireless.com for Northwest, www.mileagepluswireless.com for United, www.dividendmileswireless.com for US Airways, or www.aplusrewardswireless.com for AirTran.

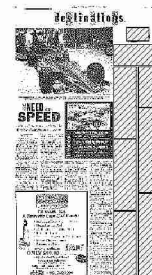
Q: Can I buy frequent-flier miles?

A: You can if you have the money. Most major airlines allow frequent fliers to buy miles, but doing so is expensive. For example, 20,000 American miles cost \$500 plus a \$30 transaction fee. That's not even enough for a round-trip ticket, which these days, if you hit it right, can cost as little as \$200 coast-to-coast. To soften the blow, American is offering a 20

percent mileage bonus on purchases of 10,000 miles or more, through May 31 (perhaps they realize what a bad deal buying miles is and need to give people a break). The only scenario I can think of where this makes sense is if you need a certain number of miles to "top off" your account to get an award that would be out of reach otherwise.

Q: I am familiar with Site59.com, which offers good, last-minute packages on air and hotel travel over the weekend. Is there something similar for inns or bed and breakfast accommodations in the New England area, such as Vermont and New Hampshire?

A: Sort of, but without the airfare (by the way, Site59.com is now Lastminute.com). Every other Tuesday, the New England Inns and Resorts Association's "Inn Crowd" e-newsletter offers subscribers up to 20 last-minute deals from among its membership base of nearly 300 inns, resorts, hotels, and B&Bs throughout the region. Travelers can sign up to receive the free e-newsletter at www.newenglandinnsandresorts.com. Vacation offerings in each newsletter are valid for up to 14 days (sometimes longer), and property choices and deals vary each time. They range from free upgrades and amenities to free room nights, with discounts from 30 percent to more than 70 percent off. Each edition features photos of all the properties offering deals, as well as a detailed description of what's included in the package, and a direct link to each property's Web site. Recently available deals: 60 percent off per night at The Equinox Resort & Spa in Manchester Village, Vt., plus full country breakfast; \$99 per night including break-



fast and a ski lift ticket each day of stay at Mount Washington Resort at Bretton Woods, N.H.; and 50 percent off at Saybrook Point Inn & Spa in Old Saybrook, Conn., with 20 percent off spa services, and free fireplace room upgrades. Several properties are members of Historic Hotels of America.

Q:What can you tell us about home exchange companies? Are they a good idea?

A: There are numerous companies that are dedicated to this money-saving strategy. Essentially, home exchange allows two parties to swap homes for a vacation, thus avoiding hotel charges.

One well-known firm is the appropriately named Home Exchange (www.HomeExchange.com or 800-877-8723). For a one-year membership of \$99.95, members will have unlimited contacts and exchanges with no additional per-exchange or per-day fees to over 14,000 listings in 110 countries around the world.

Another is International Home Exchange Network (www.iHEN.com or 386-238-3633) with properties in the United States, Mexico, Costa Rica, the Virgin Islands, France, Italy, England and more. It charges a yearly fee of \$39.95. And there's Home Exchange International (www.singlehomeexchange.com), which has listings in over 60 countries and

charges \$30 for a one-year membership, with a guarantee that if you don't find a home exchange partner during your 12 month membership, you'll receive another 12 months for free.

And if you're older, you might consider Seniors Vacation and Home Exchange (www.seniorshomeexchange.com), which caters to the over-50 group, and costs \$79 for 3 years (there's currently a limited special with the membership fee reduced to \$59 for 3 years).

Home exchanges usually work out just fine. It's a good idea to ask for a video tour of the home you're considering, and to write up an informal letter of agreement stating what you expect from your host. Are you expected to mow the lawn? Is use of the family car included? Are pets allowed? Who's responsible for cleaning when you leave. Don't be afraid to consider all the ins and outs, and put them in writing. Be a good host yourself, by preparing things like restaurant and entertainment suggestions in your locality, and a list of emergency phone numbers. Most of this is just common sense, but too many people go into home exchange without proper preparation, and that's when the trouble can start.

George Hobica is the creator of www.airfarewatchdog.com, an airfare listing and advice Web site. Readers may submit questions to askgeorge@cnc.com.